

“Under Wasatch Skies”



*A History of
Wasatch County
1858 — 1900*



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History of Wasatch County

CHAPTER I

BACKGROUND TO SETTLEMENT

The settlement of Provo Valley is not an example of isolated colonization. Rather it came near the end of an intensive period of Mormon colony planting in Utah. The settlers who came here had earned the title of pioneers in the struggle across the plains and in the establishment of towns and cities in the Salt Lake and Utah Valleys. It will be necessary to survey the extent of colonization and the religious, political, and economic conditions in Utah prior to 1858 and 1859 to understand the Provo Valley settlement.

In 1847 Brigham Young and the first company of Mormon pioneers traced a path across the Great American Desert to the Salt Lake Valley. This path later became familiar to thousands of Latter-day Saints, who came from all sections of the United States and Northern Europe. Most of them had had little experience in the type of colonizing venture posed by the Great Basin settlement. Their westward journey was prompted by religious rather than economic motives, and only under the skillful direction of Brigham Young and the Apostles of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints were the many heterogeneous family groups molded into successful communities.¹

The first colonizing efforts were concentrated in the Salt Lake Valley. Settlement elsewhere in the region was prefaced by a series of explorations under the direction of Brigham Young. These expeditions not only searched for sites on which new communities could be founded

¹Milton Hunter, *Brigham Young the Colonizer* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press 1940), p. 62.

but they also surveyed for timber, water supply, grazing possibilities, and the altitude of the mountain peaks.²

One such exploration was undertaken by a company composed of Robert and William Gardner and J. D. Parks. In September of 1852 they followed up the Weber River to its headwaters and from thence down the Provo River looking for timber and investigating the river for the purpose of floating logs down to the central settlements. William Gardner kept an account of their travels, and his description of the Provo Valley was the chief factor in opening up the region six years later. After describing the great amount of timber in the upper valleys of the Weber and Provo Rivers, he tells of following the road some twelve or fifteen miles down the Provo River to a valley seven by ten miles in extent with two large streams coming from the south into it.

Our attention was attracted by mounds about the size of a coal pit to one that appeared to be about a mile off, and which we judged to be about a quarter of a mile across and sixty feet high. They all are about the shape of a coal pit, perfectly hollow. We supposed them to be a volcano as the surface of the ground for some miles was covered with this light stone the same as the mounds, but finding some of them full of water we concluded that the formation was made by the water.³

After exploring this now famous landmark and noting that the valley could be easily irrigated they passed on to within about five miles of the mouth of the Provo Canyon. Gardner notes that the distance from their camp to the valley that connected the Provo and Weber Rivers was about twenty-five or thirty miles and a road could easily be built all the way. His description of the canyon and the river are especially significant.

²*Ibid.*, p. 32.

³*Journal History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, MSS, (L. D. S. Historian's Office Library, Salt Lake City, Utah), September 13, 1852. Hereafter cited as *Journal History*.

We continued the journey down to Utah Valley and noticed two large streams coming in on the south and one on the north. The last ten miles travel was pretty rough, but a good road could be built without much trouble by cutting into the side hill at different points, only loose rock being in the way and the Provo River is as handsome a stream for floating purposes as could be desired, it is not so rapid as the Weber River and the channel is deeper, but it's pretty rough at the mouth of the canyon, which is the best canyon for a road that I have ever seen, having fine narrow valleys with rich soil and good pasture. At the present time I think that there is more water in this river than in the Weber River. A continuation of settlements from the mouth of the Weber around to the mouth of the Provo, a distance of about 120 miles, could easily be made. From the mouth of the Weber to the headwaters of the same the distance must be about 100 miles. Good roads could be made without much expense except the last ten miles and the streams can also be utilized pretty well for floating down timber.⁴

This was not the first time the region had been visited. Gardner called the valley of the cones William's Valley because a party of that name had camped there some five years before.⁵ The significance of the Gardner expedition is that it was undertaken with the intent to explore the valley for timber and possible colonization. The suggestions he made were followed when the time came to open up the area.

The settlement of Utah Valley preceded that of Provo Valley and most of the early settlers in Provo Valley were originally residents of the former. The first settlers to Provo were sent out as early as April 1849.⁶ By 1852 such settlements as Lehi, Fort Alpine,

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶Ray Colton, "A Historical Study of the Exploration of Utah Valley and the True Story of Fort Utah," (Unpublished Master's thesis, Dept. of History, Brigham Young University, 1935), p. 56.

Pleasant Grove, Springville, Spanish Fork, Payson, and Santaquin were growing communities in and near Utah Valley.⁷ Thus, by the time the first settlements in Provo Valley were made, communities in the surrounding region were well established.

The settlements in Provo Valley were typical of Latter-day Saint settlements throughout the Great Basin, and it would therefore seem necessary to outline briefly the role of the Mormon Church in Utah at this time.

The migration of the Mormons to Mexican territory had been under the direction of the Church, and it was only natural that the Church should continue the supervision of colonization and settlement of the pioneers. Brigham Young, as president of the Church, together with the Council of the Twelve Apostles, administered affairs until the necessary civil and ecclesiastical machinery could be established for the new-born communities. The Church leaders continued to plant colonies long after the organization of Utah as a United States territory in 1850.

The groups who went out were usually provided with a bishop as the leader. In the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints the bishop is the head of an ecclesiastical unit known as a ward. The ward in turn is composed of family groups living in close proximity to one another. All over Utah, cities were built, lands divided off to the people, roads and bridges made, water ditches cut, and land irrigated and society governed under the immediate control of the bishops.⁸ The bishop also had judicial functions and early in Utah history adjusted disputes among Church members and in some cases among non-members.

By the time the first settlements were made in what was later to be Wasatch County, Utah had been made a

⁷Ibid., p. 155.

⁸Hunter, *op. cit.*, p. 366: "By 1878 some 358 colonies had been established under this system."

territory. A rather turbulent period followed in which some of the federal territorial appointees, seeking political advantage, made charges of treason and other crimes against the Mormons in Utah. Finally, in 1857 President Buchanan, fearful of the linkage of the Mormon practice of polygamy with the Democratic Party's issue of popular sovereignty, appointed Alfred Cumming as governor of Utah Territory and sent a *posse comitatus* consisting of United States' troops to see that he reached his destination.

Brigham Young, distrustful of the motives for sending such a force, prepared the Saints for the defense of their lives and liberties by calling out the Utah militia and ordering an evacuation of the members living in the Salt Lake Valley. It was only under the skillful mediation of Thomas L. Kane that an understanding was reached by which Governor Cumming entered Salt Lake City while the body of troops passed through to Cedar Valley some thirty-six miles south of Salt Lake City, where they established Camp Floyd early in July of 1858.

It is at this point that the series of events which culminated in the development of Provo Valley and the establishment of Wasatch County began.